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ABSTRACT

The Building Blocks Model for promoting basic literacy in young children is a three-dimensional model comprised of building blocks, one for each step of the process of laying the foundations for literacy. Each of the small blocks within the large solid cube represents a unique ability that can be distinguished in terms of the three dimensions--representation, language complexity, and content. Representation is defined as the use of some object, symbol, or sign to signify the meaning that some object, image, or concept has for the individual. Language complexity suggests that the words used to communicate proceed from the simple to the increasingly complex. In order to use representation, children must have ideas to represent, or content. The corner stone of the building blocks model is the simplest level of each of the three dimensions: direct experience, one-word utterances, and content that involves the individual. From this simple beginning, additional blocks are added through maturation. The model suggests the direction in which the blocks will be added but not the rate or age at which additions will occur. To use the model effectively requires that parents and teachers arrange materials and activities to extend the child's experiences in the environment, to provide opportunity to represent these ideas in different ways, and to promote the corresponding language skills. (The latter half of the paper presents specific activities designed to make the building blocks model useful.) (HOD)

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STIMULATING PREREADING ACTIVITIES

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One of the important tasks for the infant is to learn to make sense of his immediate environment. Because of his own natural curiosity he begins to explore. Through his sensory impressions and the accompanying emotional reactions, he collects and retains information in varying degrees. As the quantity of experiences increases, the child becomes aware that some of these experiences have common elements. Gradually he sees relationships and observes ways in which things are alike and, in other cases, to note differences. This ability to discriminate is facilitated if an older person talks about the experience with a child. That is, if an adult interacts with the child by answering his questions and listening and responding to the child's comments, it strengthens the associations of ideas with the experience. Moreover, he will continue to connect additional similar experiences with the appropriate words. Meaning at this early stage is embedded in sensory and emotional experiences. Nearly all forms of human activity may involve the child in the use of words. Since most of the child's first words are learned in the home, the meaning associated with them is often limited, yet very personal. Even later, the meaning we associate with words is affected by the context in which it is encountered. Words are the link between the individual's inner world of thought and his outer world of experience.

Recently, Cosby Rogers and Jane Wolfle (1981) developed a model for promoting basic literacy in young children based on Guilford's (1959) model of intelligence. It is called the Building Blocks Model. This three-dimensional model is comprised of building blocks, one block for each step of the process of laying the foundations for literacy. Each of the small blocks within the large solid cube represents a unique ability and one that can be distinguished

in terms of the three dimensions: representation, language complexity, and content.

Representation

Representation is defined as "the use of some object, symbol or sign to signify the meaning that some object, image or concept has for the individual" (Rogers and Wolfle, 1981). It is the cognitive tool that is used to construct one's understanding of his environment and is an ongoing life process. There are four representational levels.

The first is experience which is considered the foundation of all symbols with real people, real objects, and real activities. Before a sight, sound or symbol can have real meaning the children must have an actual, direct experience with the real thing. If the experience is a vicarious one such as through pictures or stories, then the image will not be as clear and may not be as accurate. An important function of both parents and teachers of preschoolers is to help children see the relationships between experiences and pictures and words.

The second level of representation, typically during the first two years of life, is the index in which children recall experiences by seeing, hearing, or touching part of a characteristic trait of the whole. The part is the clue or the index to the whole.

The next level usually occurs after age two when the child begins to use symbols to represent some object or event. These symbols may be concrete representations such as a block for a house, a plank for a bridge, or a button for a dish. They may also use mental representations such as a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic image. When a child uses a symbol it reminds him of a previous experience. He recalls things, and situations, and feelings which are no longer there. By so doing he is making use of previous experiences in a new situation.

Finally, signs are used much more extensively to communicate ideas. Signs are words or mathematical symbols agreed upon by society to have a fairly constant meaning. Spoken words begin to appear in the period up to age two and written signs are usually read in the later period of ages four to seven. (Piaget's sensorimotor and late preoperational or inquisitive stages).

Language Complexity

The words used to communicate ideas proceed from the simple to the increasingly complex. Single words or holophrases appear around age one. The single word such as "ball" is understood to mean a more complete idea like "give me the ball" or "there is a ball". Later two or more key words are combined to express meaning. Sometimes referred to as telegraphic speech, it appears around age two. In the example, "Baby hurt", the intended meaning might be "I fell and hurt myself". Fairly complete sentences and most of the basic parts of speech are heard around age three in most children. A little later sentences are combined to form short stories.

Content

In order to use representation, children must have ideas to represent. They must have experiences to think about, to talk about, to read about, and later to write about. During the first year, children distinguish themselves from their environment. The self is the first level of understanding. Next they become more aware of their neighbourhood and the community through field trips and increasing social contacts. Finally, they learn more about the broader context of the world.

Rogers and Wolfle (1981) suggest that the cornerstone of the building blocks model is the simplest level of each of the three dimensions: direct experiences, one-word utterances, and content which involves the individual. In other words, a simple expression of a very personal, first-hand experience.

From this simple beginning, additional blocks are added through maturation. The model suggests the direction in which the blocks will be added but not the rate or age at which these will occur.

To use the model effectively requires that parents and teachers arrange materials and activities to extend the child's experiences in the environment, to provide opportunity to represent these ideas in different ways, and to promote the corresponding language skills.

In order to make the theoretical building blocks model useful, a classroom teacher has to work out the application in terms of specific activities.

Some Suggestions of Practical Applications

I. REPRESENTATION LEVELS

A. Experience - direct, firsthand experiences involving one or more senses
   Example: water

   1. Sensory contact with water
      e.g.: bath, swimming, drink

   2. Interaction with water
      e.g.: splashing, pouring, sucking

   3. Variations and contrasts
      e.g.: hot and cold
      freezing and boiling
      rain, snow, ice, steam

   4. In combination with other materials
      e.g.: soap (bubbles)
      dirt (mud)
      powdered milk (drink)

B. Index - recall of direct experience by applying one or more of the senses to a characteristic trait of the whole

   1. Identifying a person, place, or thing from seeing a part of it
      e.g.: hair (sister)
      tail (dog)
      tire swing (playground)
      shoelace (shoe)

2. Identifying objects from a "feely bag" or tactile box (recognizing the whole from a tactile clue).
   e.g.: wheels (toy train)
   eraser (pencil)

3. Remembering a story from a character or event. Identifying a song or rhythm from hearing a few bars.

4. Recognizing a piece(s) of a puzzle as belonging to the whole picture puzzle.

C. Symbol - concrete or mental representation

1. Using dolls to represent people

2. Using blocks symbolically to represent people

3. Representing familiar objects symbolically through three-dimensional expression
   e.g.: modelling, carving, constructing, puppetry

4. Representing familiar concrete objects symbolically through two-dimensional expression
   e.g.: painting, drawing

D. Signs - words or mathematical symbols

1. Recognizing labels on familiar objects

2. Recognizing labels on pictures

3. Recognizing lables on representations
   e.g.: block constructions

4. Reading labels (words only)

II. LANGUAGE COMPLEXITY

A. Single Word
   Example: Child says, "Drink".

1. Adult - responds to child's request by handing him a drink.

2. Adult - enlarges the child's understanding by offering him a choice: "Do you want milk or juice?"

3. Adult - expands on the child's language in responding:
   "Which drink do you want?"
   Child - "Milk"
   Adult - "Here is your drink of milk."

4. Adult - extends the dialogue:
   "Would you like milk or juice?"
   Child - "Milk."
   Adult - "Shall I put the milk in a glass or a mug?"

B. Phrase

Example: "My new coat"

1. Adult - "Can you find your new coat?"
   Child - Action (pointing or locating)
   or "yes/no" response.

2. Adult - Enlarges on the child's description:
   "Your new coat is brown."

3. Adult - Adds an explanation:
   "Your new coat was a birthday present from Grandma."

4. Adult - Requires child to give an explanation:
   "Why did Grandma send you a new coat?"
   Child - "For my birthday"
   or "My old coat was worn out, lost, too small, etc."

C. Sentences

1. Describing a personal object
   e.g.: size, colour, texture

2. Explaining how something works or a process
   e.g.: "How did you make it?"
   "How does it move?"
   "What do you think will happen next?"

3. Reporting an event (recall)
   e.g.: "What happened?"
   "What did it look like?"
   "How did you feel?"

4. Dictating a sentence(s)
   e.g.: language experience chart or sharing the writing of a letter to someone close.

D. Stories

1. Retelling a familiar story.

2. Composing an ending to a story or telling what might happen next in a story.

3. Telling a story about a series of pictures.

4. Telling an original story.

III. CONTENT

A. Self

1. Viewing one's self in a full-length mirror or playing with a "me-doll".

2. Recognizing one's photograph (polaroid pictures).

3. Puppet activities - children use puppets to tell something "special" (unique, preferences, talents, etc.) about themselves.

4. Preparing a booklet about themselves:

   a) a picture of me
   b) a picture of my home and/or family
   c) my best friend
   d) my favourite food
   e) my favourite story/book
   f) things I like to do best
   g) places I like to visit
   h) things that make me happy, sad, mad

B. Family

1. Recognizing and relating to immediate family unit.

2. Describing family photos (illustrations) and/or making a family album.

3. Talking about visits to the extended family and/or relating to different generations in the family.

4. Dictating a letter to a family member.

C. Neighbourhood

1. Walking around the immediate neighbourhood.

2. Visiting in the immediate neighbourhood (neighbours, store, playground).

3. Making a model of the immediate neighbourhood with blocks.

4. Visiting the extended community (city, nearest town, etc.)

D. Universe

1. Welcoming a visitor from another country or culture with objects to display.

2. Describing a visit (holiday) to a different country and showing objects.

3. Learning and using greetings in other languages (hello, goodbye) or saying "thank you" in languages which are represented in the backgrounds of the group of children.

4. Explaining photographs from another country visited.

References

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